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ABSTRACT

Contrary to the popular theory that the proscenium type of playhouse was imported from France by the Court of Charles II in 1660, the Restoration playhouse in fact developed from Elizabethan theatres and court masques. These Elizabethan theatres were the private theatres, and were generally small, rectangular, roofed structures where aristocratic audiences watched performances by candlelight and received amenities not obtainable in the public theatres. Restoration playhouse characteristics derived from the costly masques in the courts of Kings James I and Charles I included the use of movable scenery, the raked stage, and the proscenium arch. The scenic Restoration playhouse was virtually complete in all its elements before the restoration of Charles II, but did not reach its culmination until the building of the Dorset Garden Theatre in 1671 and the Drury Lane of 1673. As such, it endured for two centuries and became the accepted theatre model in both England and America.

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## ORIGINS OF THE RESTORATION PLAYHOUSE

by

*Dennis D. Wilson*

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## ORIGINS OF THE RESTORATION PLAYHOUSE

by

Dennis D. Wilson

The Restoration may be said to be the period that gave birth to our modern stage<sup>1</sup> because so many innovations were introduced at that time that have become a permanent part of our theatrical heritage. These include scenery, the proscenium arch, seating in the orchestra, the introduction of actresses and possibly others.

Despite such general acknowledgement of the importance of the Restoration Period in the whole spectrum of Western theatrical history, the origins of the Restoration playhouse are not generally known. Existing information is scattered and rare, and opinions of the scholars of the

period are vague and incomplete. Little has been said beyond the general statement that Restoration playhouses developed from English models shaped by continental influences. Nevertheless, this general view is a vast improvement over the popular theory that the proscenium-type playhouse was imported in toto from France by the Court of Charles II at the Restoration in 1660.

In spite of the fact that the venerable English scholar, W. J. Lawrence, noted as early as 1912 that, "The influence of continental models on our first two theatres of the picture stage order [the Duke's Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields (1661) and the Theatre Royal in Bridges Street (1663)] was much slighter than has been popularly supposed,"<sup>2</sup> the belief persists in the myth of the dependence of the Restoration playhouses upon French models.

The problem at hand is to show first of all how the Restoration playhouse developed from Elizabethan theatres and court masques, and secondly to make a conjecture as to exactly how the early combined productions were physically mounted.

To place the Restoration in historical perspective, it should be noted that, although it did not compare with the Elizabethan Period in appeal or extent of theatrical

activity, it was a highly fertile period. This is all the more surprising when we recall that the theatre had been banned in 1642 and was thought to have been effectively extinguished. However, after eighteen years of enforced sterility during the Commonwealth Period, the English theatre was given new life with the return of the monarchy in 1660. One of the first acts of the new King, Charles II, was to license two theatrical companies and suppress all others. The managers of these troupes were Thomas Killigrew, who formed the King's Men, and Sir William Davenant, who organized the Duke's Men.

These highly-favored gentlemen-courtiers introduced to the public what seemed to be a new type of playhouse, first by Davenant in 1661, and then by Killigrew in 1663. The aristocratic audiences, seated throughout the house as never before in public theatres, observed performances on a wide platform stage flanked by permanent proscenium doors. Earlier audiences in Elizabethan private theatres were witness to performances on similar stages, but now there was a new development. Actors (and actresses) performed in front of, and sometimes within, a movable scenic background viewed through a decorated "frontispiece," the forerunner of the proscenium arch. This combination of the Elizabethan private theatre platform-facade stage with

the scenic-proscenium arch stage typical of the early seventeenth century court masque form resulted in an entirely unique playhouse with no counterpart on the continent. It was a distinctly English development<sup>3</sup> and was a curiosity to foreign visitors who often wrote admiringly of it.

#### Elizabethan Influences

Most authorities agree that the physical elements that made Restoration theatres distinctive derived from the playhouses of Elizabeth's time. The point that has not been emphasized sufficiently is that it was the private playhouses and not the public theatres that contributed most to the Restoration playhouses.

Allardyce Nicoll, for example, quite correctly states that the Restoration stage derived from the Elizabethan stage, but his statement that "this English model derived from the old platform of the Elizabethan public playhouses,"<sup>4</sup> (the italics are mine) should be altered to state that the platform stage actually passed from the private theatres, which survived by many years the public theatres. The platform was apparently quite different in the two modes, although both stages contained the same elements. Private playhouses had wide, shallow platforms that ex-

tended from wall to wall, while the public theatres had deep, narrow platforms surrounded on three sides by standing patrons (the "groundlings"). The shallow platform of the private theatres brought the background closer to the audience, a move that was symbolic of the whole trend of the future.

Another scholar, Frank Whiting, whose work is more recent than that of Nicoll, observed that, "The break between the Elizabethan and Restoration theatres is not nearly so great as most people suppose. In fact, could we compare Dorset Garden with the old indoor Blackfriars Theatre of Shakespeare's day we find no distinction whatever."<sup>5</sup> Please note that Whiting compared an Elizabethan private theatre, not a public one, to a Restoration playhouse.

Private theatres became increasingly popular from the time of the Boy Players that Shakespeare <sup>described</sup> ~~discussed~~ in Hamlet,<sup>6</sup> and they continued to prosper throughout the Stuart reigns. Indeed, the private playhouses survived the Commonwealth and became the theatre mode of the Restoration. Meanwhile, the public playhouses passed away, for the most part, with the closing of the theatres in 1642.

In the beginning, from 1576, after the establishment

of the first Blackfriars Playhouse, the private and public theatres were quite different. Private playhouses were generally small, rectangular, roofed structures with performances held by candlelight. Admission prices ranged from sixpence to half a crown, but for this relatively high cost the mostly aristocratic patrons received several amenities not obtainable in the public theatres. They were entitled to seats in the boxes, the galleries, and even on the stage, as in public theatres, but additional seating in the pit on backless benches was provided in private playhouses. The audiences of these more exclusive playhouses were quite discriminating and favored plays that depended heavily on music and spectacle, tastes that quickly led to the increasing use of scenes.

The private playhouses were the first Blackfriars of 1576, the second Blackfriars of 1596-7, the Whitefriars of circa 1607, Porter's Hall of 1615, the Cockpit or Phoenix in Drury Lane of 1616-17, and the Salisbury Court of 1629.<sup>7</sup>

#### Court Influences

Most of the above characteristics of early seventeenth century private theatres were also found in Restoration playhouses. There were, however, other elements of Restoration playhouses not derived from Elizabethan theatres, but

as a result initially of continental influences matured in England. These physical elements were, in part, the use of movable scenery, the raked stage, and the proscenium arch.

It is well known that these theatrical characteristics were introduced into the elaborate and costly masques of the Courts of King James I and Charles I by Inigo Jones, England's first scenic artist. It is interesting to note that although Jones was heavily indebted to the Italians for his staging methods, he did not slavishly accept their discoveries but laboriously experimented for years with antiquated methods, including such ancient devices as the use of periaktoi and dispersed settings. <sup>JONES</sup> ~~He~~ quickly introduced perspective painting, elaborate machinery and stationary wings with movable back shutters, but it was not until his lavish production of Davenant's Salmacida Spolia that he developed a completely movable setting, thus reaching the culmination of his efforts.<sup>8</sup> It is also noteworthy that from the time of Jones' first tentative steps in 1604 to the beginning of the Restoration over half a century elapsed, thus indicating that his methods could no longer be considered continental influences. This was recognized even in 1664 when Richard Flecknoe wrote

that "Scenes and Machines . . . are no new Invention, our Masks and some of our Playes in former times (though not so ordinary) having had as good, or rather better then we have now."<sup>9</sup>

The masque form was essentially a product of the Renaissance because of its adherence to classical stories and themes. The masques were generally allegorical tales of love and honor designed to pay homage to a particular noble or royal person, such as the king. Mythological characters were the usual subjects of the masques, but spectacle, rather than character portrayal, was the raison d'être of the masque form. Scenery was common even from the early masques, but it consisted of scenic pieces such as arbors, rocks or trees, thus qualifying for what we should term, "properties," rather than scenery. The masques were primarily elaborate dances, performed by courtiers for the court, and the participants danced among as well as before the set pieces. The concept of scenery as a background was to develop in the later masques. This form of polite drama began to appear in the plays at the private theatres even during Shakespeare's lifetime, as The Tempest, performed probably in 1611 at the Blackfriars, clearly shows.

The Combined Form:

Early Private Theatre Performances with Scenes

The scenic elements of the masques were slower in filtering down to the private theatres than the dramatic content, but not as slow as generally thought. The process began not at the Restoration but even before the Commonwealth, as early, in fact, as 1637, during the period that the Carolinian masque was most in vogue at the court of Charles I.

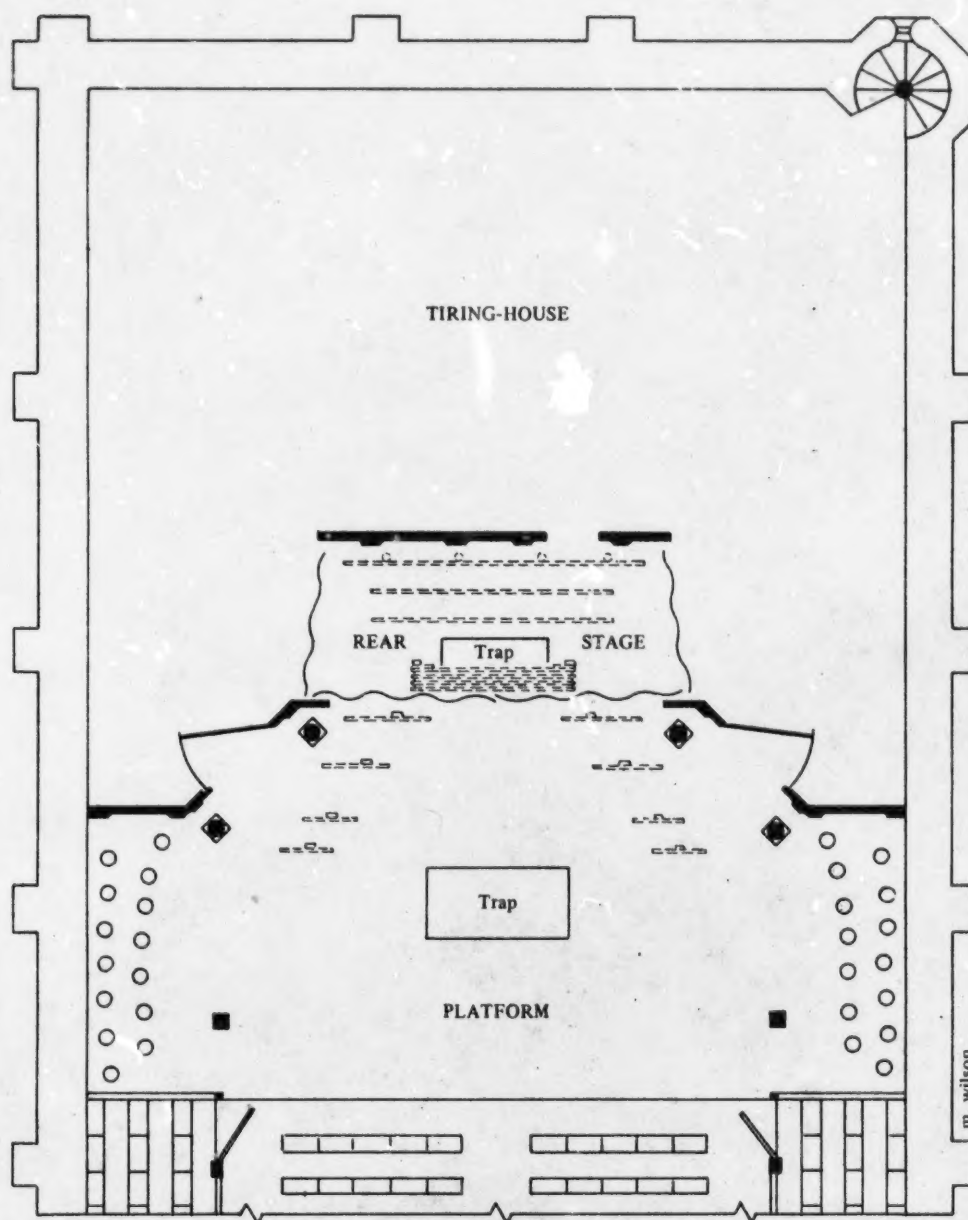
The earliest positively identified use of movable scenery on an English public stage occurred in 1637 at Salisbury Court, a small private theatre, with the presentation of Thomas Nabbes' masque, Microcosmus. The entertainment was divided into five acts and had a special temporary proscenium arch and five acts of scenes. The scenes were cryptically described as: "Within the arche a Continuing perspective of ruines which is drawne still before the other scenes whilst they are varied."<sup>10</sup> This apparently meant that a "frontispiece," or temporary proscenium arch, was installed somewhere down front on the bare platform stage of the little playhouse. Wings, which were possibly movable but definitely painted in perspective, framed movable back shutters also painted with scenery.

The shutters slid in grooves, meeting in the center of the stage, and later separated in full view of the audience to reveal successive scenes, in the manner common to the masques at court. This was possibly the first masque, complete with scenes, performed on a public stage, and the first combination of the platform stage with the scenic-masque style.

A similar performance with what were apparently movable scenes, at least at the rear of the stage, occurred the same year (1637) at another private house, the venerable Blackfriars. Sir John Suckling's Aglaura was performed with scenes on the Blackfriar's bare platform stage, and was later repeated at court in a masquing hall, as was the usual practice.<sup>11</sup> Apparently the scenes were readily portable and could as well be set up in a theatre as in a hall.

Still another use of scenes, possibly of the movable variety, took place again at the Blackfriars, this time in 1640. The event was the presentation of William Habington's The Queen of Arragon, after first being performed at court.<sup>12</sup>

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CONJECTURAL POSITION OF SCENES SET UP IN A PRIVATE THEATRE

Solid lines indicate conjectural floor plan by Irwin Smith of the stage of the second Blackfriars Playhouse (1597).

Dotted lines indicate floor plan of scenes for The Siege of Rhodes designed by John Webb.

veal the shutters which subsequently were changed as the need arose. Considering the novelty of the performance, at least before the general public, the effect could have been considerable. However the action and the scenes were integrated, the private theatre and the masque stages were effectively combined at last and the consequences were enduring.

The importance of these early pre-Commonwealth semi-public performances with scenes cannot be underestimated, even though they were far ahead of their time. The regular use of scenery of the changeable variety was not to arrive for more than twenty years.

#### Davenant and the Dawn of the Restoration

A brilliant new era in the history of the theatre was ushered in with the epoch-marking first performance of Davenant's The Siege of Rhodes at his private home, Rutland House, in 1656. This was not only the introduction of "Opera" in England, but it was the first use of movable scenes outside of court, except for the experiments noted above at the Blackfriars and the Salisbury Court. The Siege of Rhodes was without doubt the most influential scenic production up to that time and began the trend leading to the regular use of changeable scenery.

The tiny stage was set-up in a back hall in Davenant's country home and measured only fifteen feet in depth, with a proscenium opening only eleven feet high. Nevertheless, the general design was "possibly to serve as the basic pattern for the scenic arrangements of the public stage of the Restoration and early Georgian periods," according to Richard Southern.<sup>13</sup>

Davenant's success with select audiences led him to repeat the performance of The Siege of Rhodes before the public at the Cockpit in Drury Lane in 1658, two years after the original performance. The move entailed the use of the same or similar scenery as that used at Rutland House. This scenic production on an Elizabethan platform stage was so influential it moved Leslie Hotson to observe, when speaking of Davenant, "His step from private to public entertainment was greater than has been realized."<sup>14</sup>

Southern noted the important fact that this revival of the opera was at a public theatre (though nominally private to avoid censure), but not one fitted for scenic shows.

It is presumable that the Cockpit in Drury Lane had at this period a platform stage related to the little-known stages of the typical Elizabethan private houses and that the theatre would have been specially fitted up for The Siege of Rhodes, as a masqueing hall was specially fitted up for the occasion. It is unlikely that scenery was dispensed with at this presentation

since Davenant so clearly conceived of it as being part of his show.<sup>15</sup>

If the Cockpit had already been fitted up for scenes this performance would not have been remarkable. However, since it was an Elizabethan private house completely without accommodations for scenery, it had to be modified to accept scenes, or at least scenes were set up within its confines. This performance, and the others with it,<sup>16</sup> constituted the marriage, so to speak, of the two theatre modes, the private theatre platform stage and the courtly scenic masque stage, thus making it a landmark event. These performances were also the first known attempts at the regular employment of scenes before the public, as contrasted with earlier experimental productions.

Incidentally, the famous diarist, John Evelyn, was witness to one of these performances and was astounded at the production, not because of its scenic novelty, but that it was allowed at all considering the troubled times. On the date of 5 May, 1659, Evelyn commented:

Next day to see a new Opera, after the Italian way, in recitative music and scenes, much inferior to the Italian composure and magnificence; but it was prodigious that in a time of such public consternation such a vanity should be kept up or permitted. I being engag'd with company could not decently resist the going to see it, tho' my heart smote me for it.<sup>17</sup>

The prevalence of puritanical prejudices such as these

disallowed further worldly entertainments for a time. Davenant was thus free to travel to the continent to renew his courtly interests with the soon-to-be-restored monarch, and possibly to review the state of the theatre in France. Killigrew also sojourned in France at this time, but in spite of whatever theatrical expertise they brought back to England, the major influences that created the Restoration playhouse were mainly English in origin and had already had their effect.

Even though both Davenant and Killigrew followed the Parisian custom of converting tennis courts into theatres, the first Restoration playhouses (Davenant's Duke's Playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields and Killigrew's Theatre Royal in Vere Street) were uniquely British. Not only the stages, but also the auditoria of both houses were characteristic of English theatres because of the use of benches in the pit, a practice unknown in France where the patrons still stood in the parterre.

Some conclusions may be drawn from a study of the genesis of the Restoration playhouse. First, the Elizabethan private theatre was more influential upon the Restoration theatre mode than the public theatre primarily because the former, represented by the Blackfriar's, survived the interregnum, whereas the latter, exemplified

by the Globe, passed into oblivion. The private theatre survived primarily because it was an indoor theatre. This simple fact made it more useful in the typically bad English weather. It was also more "private," thus inviting surreptitious performances. The private theatre also survived for the economic reason that the more elite and wealthier patrons frequented it. Also, being indoors, it was possible to stage scenic spectacles in the private theatres, thereby allowing the masque style to slowly infiltrate the public theatres and form the combined platform-proscenium Restoration style of stage.

Finally, the scenic Restoration playhouse was virtually complete in all its elements before the restoration of Charles II, largely due to the efforts of Sir William Davenant and John Webb. The significance of this fact is that the concept of the Restoration playhouse was not based upon French models and carried across the channel by the restored court. In fact, the Restoration playhouse was completely distinctive and it was the English model that persisted to become the accepted theatre mode in both England and America.

Popular as the new vogue of changeable scenes was with the public, it was not at first accepted by the more conservative actors and scenes were relegated to the dim in-

teriors of the stages for many years where they served mainly as the background to the poetry and the action. This observation is borne out by the fact that while Davenant chose the younger actors for his theatre with scenes, Killigrew chose the older, more conservative, actors who continued to perform on a bare platform stage more or less innocent of scenery. The King's Men were finally forced to conform to the new scenic mode in 1663 when changeable scenes were incorporated in the plans of the new Theatre Royal in Bridges Street.

The evolution of the Restoration playhouse was complete by this time but it did not reach its culmination until the building of the sumptuous Dorset Garden Theatre in 1671 and the Drury Lane of 1673. It was this type of proscenium stage that endured for two more centuries and became the harbinger of our modern theatre.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Restoration Drama: 1660-1700, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1940) pp. 4, 31.

<sup>2</sup> W. J. Lawrence, The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies, (Stratford-Upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1912), pp. vii, viii.

<sup>3</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre: A Study of Theatrical Art from the Beginnings to the Present Day, 5th ed., rev. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Frank M. Whiting, An Introduction to the Theatre (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 237.

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Act II, Sc. 2, lines 353-79.

<sup>7</sup> Irwin Smith, Shakespeare's Blackfriars Playhouse: Its History and Its Design (New York: NYU Press, 1964), p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre, 3rd ed., 1946, pp. 127-130.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Flecknoe, "A Short Discourse of the English Stage," appended to Love's Kingdom, (1664), unacted.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence, p. 121, Second Series, 1913, p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Southern, Changeable Scenery: Its Origin and Development in the British Theatre (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 49.

## FOOTNOTES (cont'd)

<sup>14</sup> Leslie Hotson, The Commonwealth and Restoration Stage (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1928), p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> Southern, p. 110

<sup>16</sup> Sir William Davenant, The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru (1658) and The History of Sir Francis Drake (1659), both with scenes and costumes by John Webb.

<sup>17</sup> George C. D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1920), Vol. 1, p. 101, quoted.